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ABSTRACT

The negative effects of academic burnout on teaching, service, and research are considered, along with societal, institutional, and individual causes of burnout. Prevention and intervention for burnout are addressed, and suggestions are offered to improve faculty evaluation procedures in order to promote the use of clearer and more systematic and objective evaluation guidelines. The improved guidelines would be designed to help reduce faculty anxiety about meeting retention and promotion criteria. Problems facing faculty members include heavy teaching loads, unappreciative students, inappropriate instructor evaluation methods, and an unsatisfactory reward structure. It is suggested that burnout among faculty is linked, also, to societal demands that they accomplish too much with too few resources, along with inadequate institutional account of the problems facing faculty when evaluating their performance. Suggestions are made for reducing instructionally related stress and for supporting faculty's attempts to provide students with quality instruction. An approach to ensure appropriate use of student evaluation of instruction is proposed that would decide on the number and weight of specific teacher evaluation components and would develop evaluation forms to allow evaluators to judge a candidates's performance and collateral materials according to designated criteria. (Author/SW)

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ACADEMIC BURNOUT: A CALL TO ACTION

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ACADEMIC BURNOUT: A CALL TO ACTION

This paper defines and outlines the negative effects of academic burnout on teaching, service, and research. Societal and institutional causes of burnout are discussed, and prevention and intervention strategies proposed. Specific suggestions are made on how institutions can implement changes in faculty evaluation procedures yielding clearer, more systematic and objective evaluation guidelines. These improved guidelines would help faculty to anticipate with less anxiety and greater confidence their meeting criteria for retention and promotion. If implemented, such procedures will contribute significantly to the reduction of burnout in the academic workplace. Lastly, a plea is made for discipline-wide effort to conduct needs assessments and design burnout prevention and interview programs specifically suited to meet the needs of one's own institution.

ACADEMIC BURNOUT: A CALL TO ACTION

It has now been established that academic burnout and stress is experienced widely and problematically across all types of disciplines (humanities, arts, natural and behavioral sciences), at both small and large private and public institutions, among those offering undergraduate only as well as those offering graduate degrees (Gmelch, 1983). What is academic burnout? Nothing less than the feeling of exhaustion and ineffectiveness resulting from one's having depleted their mental and physical resources as a result of pursuing unreachable (perhaps unrealistic) objectives (Maslach, 1982).

As academicians we would naturally be vitally concerned about burnout. Its consequences bode ill for all concerned parties both in the short- and long-run. While perhaps obvious, it is nonetheless important to note specifically some of burnout's more deleterious consequences. At a personal level, burned out faculty suffer severe loss of self-esteem (Melendez, 1982), and, as is so often the case among those suffering from reduced self-esteem (Zimbardo, 1977), turn to drugs as a means of compensating for their perceived lack of self-worth. Alcoholism is particularly high among such victims (Thoreson and Hosokawa, 1984). Inasmuch as dampened self-esteem and alcoholism affect adversely one's happiness and physical health, for these reasons alone one would be concerned about reducing factors causing burnout. One notes further, however, that it is not only individual faculty members who are affected, but their families as well.

Beyond negative consequences to individual faculty members and their families, one must consider the quite serious harm done to victims' abilities to meet teaching, research, and service responsibilites. Clearly, burnout victims are less able to provide quality instruction (Dick, 1985). Specifically, recent research findings indicate that burnout victims are less creative in their instruction and resort, as one would expect from persons who are by definition quite exhausted, to routinized instructional activities (Harnish & Creamer, 1986). Hardly the delight of otherwise capable and interested students.

That burnout affects service and research is somewhat less demonstrable in that persons suffering from burnout do not always appear to be burned out. In fact, inasmuch as burnout victims are among the most idealistic (Agte, 1984), assertive and workaholistic (Seiler & Pearson, 1984) of faculty, it might appear that burnout victims are often, ironically, among the most productive of faculty. However, one must take into account what such persons might have been able to accomplish--both in terms of improved quality and increased quantity--had they not been experiencing burnout.

Assessing the real impact of burnout on service and research productivity is also made difficult by the fact that burnout victims are most frequently found among the untenured lower ranks (Gmelch, 1984). Since faculty at the lower ranks are often assigned burdensome teaching and service responsibilities, while at the same time struggling to do publishable research, it does not then come as a surprise that their reported activity levels, in relative terms, rival

or even exceed those of more senior colleagues. Again, however, it must be considered that even though their activity levels are high, that burnout probably reduces both the quality and quantity of their productivity.

Because of academic burnout's negative impact on teaching, service and research, efforts must be made both locally and nationally to design appropriate prevention and intervention programs (Agte, 1984). An initial step in this direction is to identify some of the common causes of burnout. Basically, there are both societal and institutional factors predisposing one to develop burnout.

At a societal level one notes the considerable difficulty institutions and teachers alike face in meeting difficult objectives. In general, society expects academicians to improve student retention and access, maintain (if not increase) high standards, prepare students for specific careers and at the same time provide broad-based liberal education (Boyer, 1987). Further, at both national and state levels, budget allocations for education have not kept pace with an ever-expanding educational agenda, thereby demanding of faculty that they do more and more with fewer and fewer resources. As though this were not enough, not infrequently the nation is availed a spate of national reports (e.g., Carnegie Commission Papers) that while not necessarily indicting faculty per se, nonetheless leave no question in the minds of most readers that, in general, "faculty are not doing their jobs."

The very least a dedicated faculty might expect from society is recognition and appreciation of the onerous agenda assigned academe.

Such, however, is seldom forthcoming. In fact, if recent paltry salary increases are any indication, it would appear that our society provides disincentive for pursuing the very objectives it espouses. Not surprisingly, then, faculty often feel alienated and exhausted in attempting to meet society's objectives.

Meeting societal demands would not be quite so difficult if one could be expected to draw from at least modest resources at their home institutions. Such, however, is not the case. Included among the many problems concerning inadequate resources are:

1) Heavy teaching loads (Altshuler and Richter, 1985). At many institutions (e.g., California State University System) the expected teaching load is four courses each term, not infrequently requiring at least three different preparations. Given the amount of time necessary to prepare for a four course load as well as meet ancilliary requisites, this often ends up being a forty hour per week commitment, which would be quite reasonable were not faculty expected to satisfy numerous other service and research assignments. Ultimately, then, the more conscientious (and usually more prone to burnout) faculty devote something quite in excess of fifty to sixty hours weekly to meet the full range of their professional responsibilites. And in doing so, faculty must often work with difficult deadlines, which in themselves are quite stress producing (Brown, 1986; Larkin & Clagett, 1981).

2) Unenthusiastic, unappreciative students and inappropriate instructor evaluation methods. Perhaps excessive teaching loads would be easier to accept if faculty thought they were more appreciated by

students. Interaction with apathetic students has been identified as one stressor causing academic burnout (Crase, 1980). Further, mandatory evaluation of faculty further compounds the problem in that the most apathetic, least able, and least sympathetic students are given equal opportunity as more conscientious and competent students to evaluate instructors, and often not for reasons of suggesting course improvements, but rather in order to "get even" with instructors less entertaining (and occasionally more demanding) than they would have preferred (Crase, 1980; Dick 1985). Student evaluation of instructors would pose less stress on faculty were it not for the fact the quantitative data resulting from such evaluations are often emphasized to the near exclusion of supplementary instructor evaluation information, such as peer visitations and references to supporting materials (e.g., syllabi, handouts, feedback records, etc.).

3) Unsatisfactory reward structure. In general, there is no better way to ensure development of a frustrated, emotionally exhausted, distrustful faculty than to implement conventional RTP procedures. Conventional RTP procedures, under the guise of availing maximum interpretability for diverse faculty, offer the most ambiguous guidelines possible for evaluating achievement of teaching, service, and research objectives. Faculty are advised they must provide evidence of having provided excellent instruction, but at the same time are not provided adequate (specific) suggestions on what types of evidence constitute satisfactory demonstration of excellence. Even when RTP committees agree to use standardized student evaluation forms

they often cannot reach prior agreement about how to interpret the results. Meaningful interpretation of qualitative (written) evaluations quite befuddle many RTP committees entirely.

Regarding service, most experienced faculty can testify to junior faculty being assigned predominate responsibilty for meeting committee responsibilties, yet are among the first to disclaim the importance of rendering service insofar as RTP is concerned. As one senior faculty member put it, "Rendering service will--in addition to a dime--buy you a cup of coffee, but not much more." This statement made during a recent faculty meeting and by the most senior member of the department. Concerning service, then, the message is clear: "It won't get you very far, but nonetheless insist that junior faculty do their disproportionate share; never mind that while we insist junior faculty meet disproportionately departmental service responsibilites, that they must simultaneously publish and teach excessive course loads."

Perhaps most frustrating of all is the task of demonstrating to RTP committees that one has done significant research. The only clear case would arise when the candidate has not made the least attempt to demonstrate having met research criteria. Other than in that instance, and in the absence of explicit guidelines (a rarity in most departments), the candidate is again challenged to persuade an RTP committee that their achievements meet acceptable criteria, which the candidate must themself develop, with no prior assurance of their having met unclarified expectations of RTP members.

Concerning publication, opportunity for frustration abounds. Seldom do RTP committees indicate the number of refereed articles indicating acceptable measure of competence. Should a candidate be successful in meeting that criterion, they may then be criticized for having coauthored too frequently, thereby failing to demonstrate independent effort. However, if they do publish sole authored articles they may then be criticized for being uncooperative or lacking in collegiality. If the candidate publishes in only one or two areas, they may be criticized for being too narrow. Yet if they publish in too many areas, they may be criticized for lacking a research focus.

In brief, whether the reward system concerns teaching, service, or research, the net result of its applications is usually the same. Faculty, even under the most optimistic of circumstances, know not whether they have done enough to pass through academic rites of passage into tenured and promoted status. Even when successful in doing so, however, they feel guilt for having succeeded when many other equally deserving colleagues have not. Thus, even with success comes frustration and lingering doubt about one's real worth. All of this contributes measurably to burnout.

The above would indicate that, in general, burnout among faculty is attributed to societal demands that they accomplish too much with too few resources coupled with inadequate institutional account of these factors when evaluating faculty performance. In fact, institutional policies often exacerbate the problem by subjecting faculty--particularly untenured faculty--to rigorous evaluation

procedures described in ambiguous terms. As a result of this, faculty are challenged to meet unreasonable objectives, with the certain knowledge that failure to meet these objectives might well result in negative personnel evaluations based on unclearly defined evaluation procedures. That burnout would result from this should hardly come as a surprise.

If this analysis is even partially true, then the academy would want to make concerted effort to help faculty cope with these circumstances. And while there is little that faculty and institutions can do to bring about prompt change in societal demands and expectations, there is much that can be done to make institutions more responsive to faculty needs. Moreover, inasmuch as academic burnout is predominately a function of stress associated with instructionally related activities (Gmelch, 1983), burnout prevention and intervention strategies should focus on helping faculty meet these responsibilities and assure systematic, fair evaluation of their having done so.

Available evidence indicates that instructionally related stress diminishes as a function of: reduced teaching loads (Altshuler & Richter, 1985; Brown, 1986), flexibility in teaching schedules (Gmelch, 1984), diversity in teaching assignments (Dailey & Jeffress, 1983), increased opportunity to enrich one's teaching competencies (Ruckle, 1982; Thoreson & Hosokawa, 1984) perceived reward for providing quality instruction (Gmelch, 1983), constructive and appreciative feedback from students (Crase, 1980), and absence of mandatory and punitive instructor evaluation (Dick, 1985). As a means

of constructively addressing these factors, institutions can offer maximum flexibility to departments in budgeting dollars targeted for meeting instructional objectives. Usually, departments are best able to design systems generating maximum teaching output given the resources available, thereby resulting in more manageable teaching loads than what is ordinarily imposed from upper levels of administration. Further, departments are often able to generate at least some modicum of additional release time when afforded this level of flexibility.

Institutions can also do much to support faculty attempting to provide their students quality instruction. While every institution promotes itself as demanding high standards of its students and faculty, too few offer support for those instructions meeting such objectives. For instance, at most institutions meritorious performance awards are reserved for recognizing significant advances in research or grant procurement. Less frequently, if at all, is significant effort made to recognize faculty for significant teaching accomplishments (Boyer, 1987). As one professor noted during receipt of a distinguished teaching award, colleges and universities serve notice by giving such awards that significant teaching is important, that it is truly valued and warrants significant investment of time and energy (Bacon, 1984). While awards per se are not sufficient reason for pursuing quality instruction, their existence at least signals recognition of its importance.

By far the most important measure that can be taken to reduce burnout attributed to instructionally related stress is to ensure

objective and systematic evaluation of faculty. At most colleges and universities, the standardized paper and pencil course evaluation instrument remains the single most used (or abused) tool for evaluating teaching competency (Centra, 1981; Doyle, 1975). Even where operational guidelines mandate their not assuming more than a specified weight in evaluating instructional competence (e.g., no more than 25% at the California State University, Chico), during actual deliberations RTP committees often emphasize the quantitative (numerical) results to the exclusion of other considerations (Rawlins & Zakhi, 1982). Knowing this, faculty often "teach to course evaluations"; i.e., teach courses in ways presumed to heighten course evaluation results, even when doing so is at variance with practices more in keeping with demanding, though less popular, instruction.

It is not argued here that we ought not use or that we should ignore student evaluations of instruction, but rather that they should be used appropriately. To be used more appropriately (with greater reliability and validity), they should be administered more frequently and in more varied ways (Todd-Mancillas & Essig, 1982), should not weigh more heavily than other at least equally valid methods of instructor evaluation (e.g., peer visitations), and should be restricted to yielding information relevant to only certain dimensions of teaching/learning experiences; i.e., student perceptions of teachers' communication and management competencies, and ability to generate favorable affect toward the subject matter. Students ought not, for instance, be invited to pass judgment on a professor's competence to teach a given subject matter, as they lack sufficient

expertise to make that determination, and merely asking the question implies an unwarranted respect for their opinion on that point.

To date, many excellent course evaluation instruments have been developed useful for obtaining student evaluations of teachers' communication competencies and abilities to generate positive affect. Thus, obtaining instrumentation is not a problem. Ensuring, however, that they not be overused is a problem. Perhaps the following approach might be taken to ensure that student evaluation of instruction be weighed no more heavily than thought appropriate relative to other important considerations when evaluating teaching competencies.

First, decide on the number and weight of specific teacher evaluation components. For example, an RTP committee might decide on four equally weighted teacher evaluation components as follows: Student evaluations of instruction, peer evaluations of instruction averaged across three or more classroom visitations, peer evaluations of syllabi and instructional supplementary materials (e.g., handouts, study guides, assignment sheets, feedback forms, et cetera); and evidence of instructor having challenged students to meet high standards (e.g., candidate's course grade point averages compared with departmental and university norms, quality of written feedback on paper assignments).

Second, after deciding upon the above components, evaluation forms are developed allowing evaluators to judge a candidate's performance and collateral materials according to designated criteria. Further, these forms are constructed so that for each component

evaluators must arrive at one specific numerical value (probably resulting from an averaging across several criteria).

Third, evaluators average across all four evaluation components the four specific summary values derived from implementing step two. The resulting numerical value is for each evaluator their summary evaluation of a candidate's overall teaching compentence. When for each candidate overall teaching competence scores are summed and averaged across all evaluators, the resulting value constitutes one committee's overall assessment of the candidate's teaching competence. If necessary, this information can be used in rank ordering all candidates to determine relative rankings.

What results from this process is the systematic inclusion of information important in assessing teaching competence not excessively weighed in favor of any one component, and which makes clear what steps an evaluation (RTP) committee must go through in assessing teaching competencies. Accordingly, no one evaluator is at liberty to skew their evaluation in favor of one or another component, to the favor or disfavor of one or another candidate. Under current procedures, such skewing often takes place as there are few systematic safeguards against loose, nonsystematic applications of only broadly defined criteria.

In following the above or like procedures significant advance can be made in demonstrating to faculty a willingness to be more objective and systematic—if not also open—in their evaluation of faculty performance. Quite similar procedures can be followed in evaluating faculty according to the extent to which they meet service and

research criteria. In so doing, much of the mystery underlying faculty evaluation would be eliminated. Moreover, faculty would have a much clearer understanding of what constitutes acceptable and better-than-merely-acceptable performance standards. With that information faculty would then be in a much better position to plan their professional activities and anticipate with greater confidence their receiving timely, fair recognition for their contributions. At present, owing to the ambiguousness and capriciousness of current evaluation procedures, many faculty do not have this expectation. Without question, greater clarity and fairness in personnel evaluation procedures would result in significant improvement in faculty morale and reduction in burnout.

While the above suggestions may have promise, realizing that promise would be maximized to the extent that faculty at all levels of professional achievement are involved in the design, implementation, and constructive revision of such evaluation systems. However, many senior faculty and administrators will not endorse such involvement until it is demonstrated to them that burnout is, in fact, a problem at their own institutions. Thus, as a first step in reducing academic burnout, and consistent with responsible change in educational settings (Todd-Mancillas & Kibler, 1975), it is necessary to establish whether burnout is a problem at one's own institution. To do this, needs assessments must be done yielding specific information about the extent to which burnout is experienced and what its perceived consequences seem to be (Rogers, 1983). Moreover, inasmuch as burnout is a discipline-wide problem, needs assessment teams need to be formed

representing a cross section of disciplines, with resulting data collection and analysis demonstrating how and to what extent burnout is experienced among one's peers.

If it can be established that burnout is a significant problem at one's institution, these same research teams can then go on to develop specific intervention and treatment programs suited to meet the needs of their own faculties and institutions. These programs will, of course, have to be monitored and modified to improve their effectiveness and meet demands of changing faculty and institutional needs. As such, and contrary to current norms, colleges and universities will have made an integral part of their functioning the monitoring of their faculty's professional health, with the implied commitment to improve that health to the benefit of all concerned, including faculty, colleagues, students, and the public-at-large.

In summary, then, this paper has attempted to demonstrate that: academic burnout is a significant problem at many colleges and universities; its causes stem from societal and institutional factors amenable to constructive intervention; much can be done to ameliorate academic burnout, including making faculty evaluation procedures more clear, objective, and systematic; as an initial step in treating this malaise, faculty should conduct research assessing burnout's existence on their own campuses, followed by development of appropriate intervention strategies.

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